**Backing Removal**

*Definition*

This treatment involves the removal of unwanted (normally acidic) secondary supports from the back of an original.

*Methods*

Backing removal methods vary as much as backing materials and adhesives are different. There are, however, some established methods that respond to very recurring backings. The most common backing

**Traditional 3-phase method**

This method is employed to remove layer-structured cardboard backings that are adhered to the object with an aqueous adhesive such as starch paste or animal glue. There are three phases in the process:

1. Splitting
2. Thinning
3. Removal of residues

1. Splitting

Most cardboards have a layered structure that can be separated by introducing a semi-sharp spatula (usually made of teflon, bone, plastik, turtle-shell, bambu or ivory). This process can be repeated several times until the board reaches the thickness of a thick paper.

1)  
2)  
3)
2. Thinning

The backing needs to be reduced to a thin skin in order to lift it safely using gels and poultices. Thinning is done using scalpels with a wide blade and removing a small piece each time. The closer to the original the more careful and patient needs to be the conservator.

3. Removal of residues

When the backing is reduced to a very thin layer it can be humidified using a gel poultice, such as Methyl cellulose, Laponite or Agar gel. The idea is to introduce enough moisture within the adhesive layer so as to soften it, lift the backing and scrap the adhesive away with a flat blade. Moisture can be in some cases introduced directly with a brush, as long as the liquid does not reach the recto. Steam can be a good method too, as it introduced heat as well as moisture, a vital factor in some cases such as PVA glues.

Warnings

- Remember that some backings are original or have an important historic significance. Look for signs of original paint on them. If that is the case do not remove.
- Never put an original piece in danger for the sake of removing it from its backing. Carry out
backing removal only when absolutely sure that it can be done.

- Always lay the object flat on a CLEAN and SMOOTH surface FACE-DOWN. Never attempt lifting the primary support from the backing, but the backing from the primary support.
- Do not push splitting too far. It is better to change to the scalpel earlier than risking tearing the original object with a spatula.
- Change scalpel blades as often as necessary when thinning down a cardboard backing.

**Immersion**

If solubility tests confirm stability of media and there is no risk of surface texture alteration (remember that middle-eastern papers are often burnished!) a backing with a water soluble adhesive can be removed safely by immersing the entire object in water. Before the immersion however, the backing board must be reduced as much as possible, ideally to the point where it is thinner than the actual primary support, so as to prevent the sudden expansion and distortion of the cardboard tearing the original.

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**Warning**

- Do not immerse anything ever if you are not absolutely sure about the stability of support and media in aqueous immersion.
- Do not use this technique on very thin and fragile papers adhered to strong card boards.
- Not that traditional middle-eastern paper is often burnished for surface texture. Do not immerse if there is a risk of irreversible loss of the surface texture.
Removal of textile backings

Warning

• Remove textile only if it poses a preservation problem to the primary support. Many textile backed papers are stable and/or historically significant. Maps are traditionally lined with textile backings, the lining being very much part of their nature.

Further Reading


  http://cool.conservation-us.org/jaic/articles/jaic24-01-003.html
- Talas or Klug Conservation, Albertina Poultice: